

# Ashley Swearengin's controller campaign fuels questions about Fresno mayor's job

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A political expert wonders if Ashley Swearengin can run for state controller and run California's fifth-largest city at the same time.

If she can effectively do both, perhaps Fresno doesn't need a 24/7 strong mayor.

"We're going to find out if mayor is a full-time job," Fresno State political science professor Tom Holyoke says.

Swearengin's campaign for controller "is going to be a major undertaking," Holyoke says. "If the city runs perfectly well while she's doing this, then maybe the strong-mayor form of government is overblown.

"If the city proves to be leaderless, and therefore rudderless, then perhaps the strong-mayor system doesn't easily accord with a mayor who pursues other ambitions."

Swearengin on Wednesday said she will run for controller, even though she has nearly three years left in her second term. John Chiang, the incumbent controller, is termed-out next January.

By Friday, she had turned in what was required: nomination papers, declaration of candidacy and code of fair campaign practices. She also paid a \$2,783 filing fee.

Swearengin says she will have no trouble fulfilling her duties as Fresno's chief executive while chasing votes in a state that stretches from Crescent City in the north to San Diego in the south, a drive of 850 miles.

"I'm used to having a lot of irons in the fire," Swearengin says.

Still, it seems obvious that something's got to give.

Swearengin is a Republican in a state with heavy Democratic voter registration. If her candidacy isn't a political maneuver to position herself for a 2016 campaign, Holyoke says, then delivering a serious campaign means negotiating a steep learning curve.

Swearingin says the controller's job may be the second most-powerful elective position in the nation's most populous state. The controller is California's fiscal agent. The controller disburses state funds, administers the state payroll system and audits various state and local government programs, to name only a few of the duties.

"It's a job with a great deal of fiscal responsibility," Holyoke says.

So, too, is mayor.

Fresno for about 40 years elected a mayor citywide who had one of seven City Council votes. The city manager, hired and fired by the council, ran day-to-day operations. Voters had many reasons in 1992 for scuttling this system and replacing it with a council-strong mayor government. Many Fresnoans had had a belly full of seven legislators competing to be City Hall's dominant force. But people also thought a fast-growing Fresno needed a full-time chief executive to oversee the challenges of a new century.

That assumption has remained conventional wisdom since Jim Patterson took the oath in January 1997 as the first strong mayor. It's why the council in 2006 hiked the mayor's annual salary from \$99,360 to \$130,000.

Another assumption is now in the mix: The state's voters get a part-time controller's candidate or Fresno gets a part-time mayor.

Swearingin says that's nonsense. She says five years on the job has allowed her to get the city's business on a firm foundation. She says she has a strong senior management team in place. She says she has the spare time to run for a state office without betraying her commitment to Fresnoans.

Tim Clark, her campaign's top consultant, explained Friday how Swearingin will do both jobs without skimping on either.

Clark says Swearingin this week is calling family and friends to tell them about her new political quest. She is helping build a finance team and a website team, he says.

Clark says the next week or two will see a "soft" roll-out of the campaign — an official statement of candidacy and the first trip to major media outlets throughout the state. Policy reports "making our position why she should be hired for the job" will follow, he says.

Clark says running for a statewide office in many ways is less time-intensive than running for regional offices such as state Senate or Assembly or, even, the City Council.

"You're not walking precincts," he says.

Clark says Swearingin's mayoral experience, with its focus on high-level finances, has given her a solid foundation for the controller's race. "She's capable of taking huge volumes of data and understanding them," Clark says.

But as Holyoke notes, Swearingin's campaign will have the unintended effect of holding the strong-mayor system up to judgment. Is it working?

There have been three strong mayors. Patterson, termed out in January 2001, had only four years as strong mayor. Alan Autry was mayor from 2001 to 2009, but his heart seemed elsewhere in the second term. He tried to leave City Hall after the first term, changing his mind only after his preferred successor decided not to run.

City Hall in those 12 years seemed as prone to political heartburn as in the preceding four decades.

Swearingin, of course, isn't the first politician to run in midterm for another office. That's as American as apple pie.

Nor is she the first Fresno politician to do so. Council Member Blong Xiong, for example, ran for Congress in the 2012 primary. No one at City Hall batted an eyelash.

Perhaps the most storied midterm campaign in local political lore was Mayor Dan Whitehurst's failed effort in the Democratic Party's 1982 U.S. Senate primary. Fresno City Hall will always be a tough launching pad for statewide political office. After Whitehurst, it was no longer laughable.

But Xiong in 2012 was one of seven council members. The mayor's unique powers in 1982 were largely symbolic. Whitehurst sought a seat in the U.S. Senate that had no departmental responsibilities.

Swearingin's situation is dramatically different. She is in charge of a city with 500,000 people and a \$1 billion budget. She is pursuing the job of financial czar for the world's ninth-largest economy. She is doing both at the same time.

She is rocking the local political boat.

Council Member Paul Caprioglio says Fresno should return to the council-manager system.

"You're sometimes trapped in that particular leader's agenda," Caprioglio says, emphasizing that he has no particular mayor in mind. "That agenda may not be what others feel is in the best interest of the entire community. People's voices need to be heard more strongly. The only way to do that is divide responsibilities among all council members."

Swearingin says that would be a disaster.

"There's no doubt in my mind that in a city the size of Fresno, with as many challenging issues as we face, you have to have an elected executive," Swearingin says. "I'm a strong proponent for this form of government. It produces a much more efficient administration and gives the agency an opportunity to advance."

"What we saw with the council-manager form of government was just the status quo. Nothing could move forward. You cannot run a city by committee."

Holyoke says Swearengin has only herself to blame if some council members, seeing the mayor's seat largely empty this campaign season, make noises about revisiting Fresno's form of government.

Referring to a midterm run for higher office, Holyoke says: "Ashley Swearengin isn't going to be the last mayor of Fresno who will be thinking like this."

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